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ABSTRACT

Although most community college faculty are not engaged in research, community college settings can provide research opportunities for those faculty members determined to overcome the considerable obstacles. At Whatcom Community College, in Washington, for example, constraints facing faculty seeking to conduct research include limited access to materials, lack of support from the institution and colleagues, and lack of time. The limited access to materials can be overcome through extensive use of interlibrary services, establishing a good working relationship with the library director and other libraries, exploring other resources, using other libraries in the area, and utilizing personal on-line Internet access. While the college does not generally provide much financial support for many kinds of research, it does support the value of research on instructional programs and student services. This type of research, such as a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum survey to gauge student apprehension about writing, has the potential to expand into other academic disciplines and provide data for planning courses. In general, time constraints for research can be especially burdensome at community colleges; release time can be very difficult to obtain since the colleges are not research institutions. However, as community colleges play an increasing role in the education of the population, community college faculty should be given the opportunity to engage in research which provides a critical foundation for course content. (TGI)

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Against the Odds: A Discussion of the Problems and Solutions of Researching at a Community College

by

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Against the Odds: A Discussion of the Problems and Solutions of Researching at a Community College

A survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in late fall of 1994, found that of the approximately 886,000 faculty currently employed in America's colleges and universities, 12 percent were "primarily engaged in research." The study indicated as well that "in two-year colleges, almost no full-time faculty were primarily engaged in research" (On Campus, February, 1995). The results of this survey are not startling as they relate to community colleges, particularly given their role and mission within many state systems of higher education. But what was startling to me was the study's apparent dismissal of the notion that any research activity was undertaken by faculty in community colleges period. The fact is community college faculty do engage in research despite the odds. Many of us are pursuing avenues of inquiry that our colleagues in four-year institutions are similarly engaged in. And, while the expectation to perform research may be different, community college settings can and do provide research opportunities for those determined to overcome the odds.

This paper looks at the "odds against " conducting research at one institution, my institution, Whatcom Community College. What I feel I can contribute here today is an account of of how I have dealt with constraints

not customarily encountered even in community college settings. The constraints include such things as not having access to materials, support, and of course, time. In my efforts to continue researching, I have dealt with these constraints and have come up with some creative solutions. It is my intent to share with you my experiences and ideas regarding continuing to engage in research at a community college.

To begin, I'll provide you a little background on the institution. Whatcom Community College is located in Bellingham, Washington, a small city 90 miles north of Seattle, Washington. The college is twenty-five years old, the last five of which have been spent at one, central campus, in a new and fastly developing retail area north of downtown Bellingham. The college is housed in three main buildings. We are awaiting the opening of a physical education facility and a performing arts building. We are a growing institution, with approximately 5,000 FTE students, 36 full-time faculty, of which I am one, and 120 adjunct faculty. I have been teaching at Whatcom Community College since the fall of 1993.

Since we are a growing institution, we are under extreme pressure to provide numerous services. The one service students and faculty alike are often quick to claim needs attention is the library. Our library, if metaphorized as a child, could be said to have had a non-traditional upbringing. This may explain why it is the way it is today, aware that other institutions have a traditional role, yet aware of the possibilities of not being traditional. Our library, mainly because of lack of funding, is alternatively described as a "learning resource center," a place where people can

'access' a limited number of materials, or a "library," where again they can 'access' a limited variety of materials. Currently it is a library with holdings consisting of 11,000 titles, 13,000 volumes, 1300 media titles, 15 computers with five electronic subscriptions, and 125 print subscriptions (Collections Information, 6/30/93). Based on these figures, the Washington State Library Planning and Development Division, February, 1994 report, lists WCC 12th of the 13 community college libraries in the state.

My desire in providing you this data is not to enlist your pity but rather provide you a basis for understanding how necessary creativity and good humor is given the situation. The measures I have taken to try and overcome the constraints imposed by limited access to materials include:

1. Extensive use of interlibrary loan services. I should note that without the support of the Dean of Instruction, I would not have had such extensive use of this service as a ready option, since it involves both the use of a librarian, on-line fees, and other related costs.

2. Establishing a good working relationship with the Library Director and other librarians. I have often enlisted the help of librarians when trying to locate materials. They have provided both help and suggestions in attempting to locate materials via interlibrary loan.

3. Look at other resources. I have learned to gather bibliographies on subjects I am interested in. I can take these bibliographies directly to the librarians and they will locate the materials. We have devised a system whereby they keep my requests on file and monitor my intake to ensure I'm

not overwhelmed with new books.

4. I use other libraries in the area which include Western Washington University in Bellingham. The University of Washington will only loan through inter-library loan but the Library Director is currently trying to obtain loan privileges for me to check out books directly.

5. In the not so distant future, WCC plans on providing access to Internet where I will be able to search library holdings. In the meanwhile, I am getting set up to go on-line through my home computer.

Taken together, these measures have allowed me to overcome, to a considerable degree, the lack of access to a research library. As time and technology advance, I feel confident I will find even more ways to access materials.

The second constraint I have had to deal with involves support. By this I mean not only monetary support from the institution but support from colleagues who share a common understanding of what the psychology of conducting research entails. To be blunt, faculty are given minimal financial support by the institution. But, in other ways the institution does support the value of research, especially as it relates to instructional programs and student services. For example, I am involved currently with a Writing Across the Curriculum survey designed to gauge student apprehension about writing. Likewise, I have begun surveying speech courses for evidence of student interest in various types of course offerings. This research has the potential to expand into other academic disciplines providing important data for future planning of courses. As for support

among colleagues, I have this generally and feel other's are interested in the subjects I am researching. Yet, my colleagues, for the most part, do not engage in research for publication.

The third constraint I've identified is time. This constraint is not unique to either two or four year institutions, hence I will not belabor the point regarding my particular lack of time. I will highlight, however, a singularly important difference between the two and four year institutions, and that is release time from teaching. In a community college setting, release time for research is very difficult to obtain, whereas, in four year institutions, this is not nearly the case, especially at research institutions. This difference, quite obviously, is related to expectations about conducting research. As I mentioned previously, research is usually not expected at the community college level, whereas in many four year institutions, the norm is faculty engage in some form of research.

Needless to say, I do not have release time to work on my research. I won't deny this has had an impact on the amount of research I have conducted. But, I have been able to write one major paper a year since my hire at Whatcom Community College, and I am soon going to start revising my dissertation for future publication. I realize that certain compromises must be made but I also believe that given time and the will to succeed, I can continue to overcome the constraints of researching at a community college.

In closing, I would like to comment that while researching at a community college is probably not the norm, it should be supported. My

perception is that community colleges provide considerable opportunities for research which could aid in the understanding of many complex problems. I think, as well, that as long as those in the academy chose to perceive the community college setting as an unlikely source of research activity, then expectations will continue to be low. As community colleges play an ever increasing role in the education of the population, they too could benefit from the assumption that faculty research serves a critical purpose undergirding the content of coursework. Those community college faculty who want to research should be encouraged and supported in their efforts.

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